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JAPANESE LYRIC POETRY AS AN AID TO TEACHING DESCRIPTION

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For some time I have been insisting to my Freshmen that the best description is very short and accurate; that a diffuse page-long effort on "Sunset on Puget Sound," or "Sunrise on Mount Rainier" is much waste of time and paper; that a description in which all the emotion is expressed by the writer is not one which would produce the intended emotion in the reader. I have preached *ad nauseam* the virtues of brevity, precision, and suggestion; I have tried many and various devices to achieve them, but with indifferent success. Finally I hit upon a plan which I think is worth passing on. I found just what I wanted in the tiny Japanese lyrics known as the *Tanka*, and the *Haikai* or *Hokku*, in which a whole emotional experience or a landscape is compressed within very small compass—in the Japanese language, thirty-one syllables for the *Tanka* and seventeen for the *Haikai*.

We read a great many in class, such as the following:

On the plum blossoms
Thick fell the snow;
I wished to gather some
To show to thee
But it melted in my hands.

Fall gently
O thou rain of spring!
And scatter not
The cherry flowers
Until I have seen them.

'Twas the new moon.
Since then I waited—
And lo! tonight!

I come weary
 In search of an inn—
 Ah! these wistaria flowers!

'Tis the first snow,
 Yet someone is indoors—
 Who can it be?

Thou little sparrow!
 Get aside, get aside,
 The honorable horse passes by.

How delightful!—
 Crossing a summer-brook,
 Sandals in hand!

Autumn's full moon!
 Lo, the shadow of a pine tree
 Upon the mats!

Let me turn over,
 Pray, go away,
 Oh my cricket!

On a withered branch
 A crow is sitting
 This autumn eve.

We discussed the similarity between the art of the *Haikai* and the art of the Japanese print, with which we are all tolerably familiar out here, and found that the method was identical—the eradication of all superfluous touches. Then we set to work to write, not *Haikai*, but short sentences, or phrases which would reflect the same qualities—brevity, precision, and suggestion.

Some of the results were rather puzzling, as:

The roof was broken, the rail was broken,
 But the moon was full, and that saved him.

This I considered at first ill-timed levity; then I guessed that it was a conundrum. It was meant in good faith, however, as the description of a refugee in a ruined house in Flanders! The class soon selected the good ones and denounced the poor ones.

In the main, the assignment was successful. Those who did not produce good descriptions saw the reason and will do better next time. Already the ordinary themes are showing the good effects of the discipline imposed by the task. One interesting development was that the boys who have stoutly maintained that they have no imagination, did much of the best work. A few of the results are appended:

NIGHT IN THE WOODS

Moving shadows upon the fir trees,
Light from a dying fire.

EIGHT O'CLOCK ON AN OCTOBER MORNING

The quick walk of a student;
The swish-swish of fallen maple-leaves;
The clatter of breakfast dishes.

DAWN

It is dawn and the pansy faces are covered with tiny drops of pearl.

SUMMER NIGHT

Above the chirp of the crickets comes the howl of a distant coyote.

SPRING

Boys with their marbles;
Girls jumping rope;
Welcome, Spring!

ACCIDENT

A car with broken wheels lying on the parking strip against a telephone pole.

AUTUMN

Vines with a few highly colored leaves.
A deserted bird's nest clinging close to the wall.

THE END OF THE TRAIL

A shot, then silence, and a vulture circling lower and lower.

AUTUMN

A squirrel with bulging cheeks;
A bluejay chattering shrilly;
The many colored leaves fluttering to the ground.

SPRING

Black earth, brown twigs,
Green bursting forth.

ROMANCE

The whippoorwill, the arbor.
The moon looked down and smiled.

THE RANGER

The snow blew about a little cabin high up on the mountain.

REST AFTER TOIL

The full harvest moon shed its light over the quiet farmhouse.

DEFIANCE

O, wind of the north!
On the cliff a bending fir tree.

THE DAY AFTER

The fifth of July; an open space covered with remains of a picnic.

WINTER

A clear, cold night; a wide expanse of snow, and a wolf on the hilltop,
howling at the moon.

HOME

A golden glow on the window,
A fire on the hearth.

SUMMER NIGHT

The island sleeps.
The wavelets, silver-crested, kiss her feet.

WINTER MORNING

The waves beating angrily on her shores,
The island trembling wakes.

AUGUST

The foghorn disturbs the silence.
Against the gray curtain a lone heron
Sails on a bit of drift on the lazy tide.

EVENING

The cattle are lowing at the pasture bars.
Against the sky's edge a lad on his pony comes riding.